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Alaska's Heritage

CHAPTER 4-11: RAILROAD TRANSPORTATION

Alaskans look to railroads

Railroads, providing relatively low-cost, versatile, and rapid transportation, opened the American west in the nineteenth century. Those railroads had an impact on Alaska. They were, for instance, responsible for relocation of the arctic whaling fleet headquarters from Hawaii to San Francisco. It was only natural for Alaskans to look to railroads to open up the territory where they lived and sought their fortunes.



Alaska rail lines, 1897 to present.

As early as 1885, Sitka and Juneau residents petitioned Congress for a railroad charter. They proposed a Chilkoot Pass and Summit Railroad Company, asking for a grant of land of one mile to either side of the railroad route and authority to issue bonds up to the amount of one million dollars. This would have been similar to grants made to railroads in other parts of the United States.

Nothing came of the 1885 request. No law authorized such a charter in Alaska. But in 1897 Congress passed a bill that permitted the building of railroads in Alaska. It provided for establishment of rights-of-way, terminals, and stations. More than 50 corporations subsequently organized to build railroads in Alaska. Many existed only on paper, some did preliminary work such as surveying, few actually started construction, and still fewer actually completed and operated railroads.

ALASKA RAIL LINES—1897 TO PRESENT	
(Dates represent beginning and end of rail lines)	
1.	White Pass and Yukon Railway (1898-1982) (U.S.-Canada)
2.	Alaska Central Railroad (1904-1909)
3.	Alaska Northern Railroad (1909-1915)
4.	Alaska Railroad (1915-Present)
5.	Copper River and Northwestern Railway (1906-1939)
6.	Tanana Valley Mines Railroad (1905-1917)
7.	Yakutat and Southern Railway (1903-1949)
8.	Alaska Home Railroad (1907)
9.	Cook Inlet Coal Field Company Railroad (1900-1907)
10.	Katalla Coal Company Railroad (Early 1900s-1908)
11.	Alaska Pacific Railroad and Terminal Company (1907)
12.	Apollo Consolidated Mining Company (1897-1917)
13.	Ketchikan Pulp Company (1954-Present)
14.	Alaska Lumber and Pulp Company (1959-Present)
15.	Rush and Brown Copper Mine Railroad (Early 1900s-1908)
16.	Alaska Marble Company Tramway (Early 1900s)
17.	Treadwell Mines Railroad (Early 1900s-1917)
18.	Salmon Creek Railroad (1913)
19.	Alaska Juneau Gold Mine Railroad (1911-1944)
20.	Alaska Gastineau Mining Company Railroad (1914-1921)
21.	Council City and Solomon River Railroad (1907)
22.	Wild Goose Railroad/Nome to Anvil Creek (Early 1900s-1905)
23.	Wild Goose Railroad/Council City to Ophir Creek (1902-1906)
24.	Seward Peninsula Railroad Company (1906-1913)

In the last category, the most important railroads were the White Pass and Yukon Railway running from Skagway to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory; the Alaska Railroad running from Seward to Fairbanks; and the Copper River and Northwestern Railway, running from Cordova to the Kennecott Copper Mines in the Wrangell Mountains. The White Pass and Yukon was built to serve gold rush stampeders to Canada's Klondike. The Alaska Railroad was built to serve as the main route from an ice-free port on the Gulf of Alaska to Interior Alaska. The Copper River and Northwestern was built to serve the needs of a single large mining operation, although at one time consideration was given to making it the basis of the main route from ice-free waters to Interior Alaska.

There were also several much shorter railroads, usually built in connection with development of gold fields. All of Alaska's railroads are summarized in

the table titled "Alaska Rail Lines-1897 to Present."

The White Pass and Yukon Railway

Stampeders in the late 1890s rushed to gold fields in Canada's Klondike by four main routes. By one route they went entirely by water, using ocean-going vessels from ports such as San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle to go to St. Michael. There they transferred to river boats that went up the Yukon River. By the other three routes, they went by ocean voyage to trail heads on the Alaskan coast and then by trail. Such trails included the Valdez Glacier Trail, the Chilkoot Trail, and the White Pass Trail.

Use of the White Pass and Chilkoot trails to Interior Alaska all but ended when the White Pass and Yukon Railway was completed. It connected Skagway and Whitehorse. Railway construction began in May of 1898. By late the following winter, tracks reached the White Pass summit. The last rail was laid July 29, 1900.



A White Pass and Yukon Railway train crossing White Pass summit two weeks after the railroad was completed on July 29, 1900.

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Identifier: PCA 75-160

The railway was built at a total cost of over \$10 million. Contractor Michael J. Heney directed the operation. The rails climbed to the summit of White Pass, 2,885 feet high, in 21 miles. Of the total of nearly 111 miles of narrow gauge track, about 20 miles were in Alaska, 42 miles in British Columbia, and 58 miles in Yukon Territory.

The White Pass route settles down

After the excitement of the gold rush, the White Pass and Yukon Railway settled into a quiet existence. Its cars carried ore from Canadian mines to Skagway. There the ore was loaded aboard ship and taken south. The White Pass and Yukon also took tourists who arrived at Skagway by sea from there to Whitehorse. At Whitehorse, some boarded steamboats for travel to Fairbanks.



Major gold rush routes to Alaska. One, the White Pass route, became the location of Alaska's first major railroad.

World War II enlivened the railroad's existence. Its owners "loaned" the White Pass and Yukon to the United States government. The government operated the railroad during the war, hauling war supplies by train to Whitehorse and from there by Yukon River steamer into Alaska.

After World War II, the White Pass and Yukon eked out an existence hauling tourists and freight. Then in the 1970s a highway connected Whitehorse and Skagway. A decrease in rail traffic left the White Pass and Yukon's future in doubt. In the mid-1980s it was not certain that the railroad would survive.

The Copper River and Northwestern Railway

Discovery of gold caused the White Pass and Yukon Railway to be built. Discovery of a different mineral led to the building of another railroad.

Builders of that railroad, the Copper River and Northwestern, hoped to exploit Southcentral Alaska's copper deposits.

Prospectors staked copper claims in the Copper River basin in 1899. These and later claims created interest in building a railroad to Interior Alaska through the Copper River valley. The Bering River coal fields, just to the east of the point at which the Copper River empties into the Gulf of Alaska, could provide fuel for such a railroad. Ore from the gold and copper mines of the Copper River basin could provide profitable cargo for such a railroad. The principal questions to be settled were: (1) who would build such a railroad; and (2) where should it start?

Alaska Syndicate chooses Valdez

Coastal towns in Southcentral Alaska vied to become the seaport from which the railroad to the Interior would drive inland. In 1903 the Valdez Chamber of Commerce proclaimed that there was no doubt a railroad would be built from Valdez, although other locations were being considered.

In 1905, mining engineer Stephen Birch persuaded wealthy East Coast financiers, among them J. P. Morgan and the Guggenheim brothers, to organize the Alaska Syndicate. The syndicate was to build a railroad to the copper claims. Its members were involved in the biggest shipping firm in the north, the Alaska Steamship Company, and had large holdings in Alaska canneries, gold mines, and gold dredges. Just as the Valdez Chamber of Commerce predicted, the syndicate chose Valdez for the beginning of the rails.

Before any rails were laid from Valdez, another line was started from what is now known as Cordova. It was then a small cannery community known as Eyak. Michael J. Heney, the man who was going to build a railroad north from there, gave the town its new name when he arrived there in 1906. Heney had been construction supervisor of the successful White Pass and Yukon Railway. His financial backers were the Close Brothers of London, who had financial interests in the Bering River coal fields. Heney quickly pushed his new railroad up the Copper River. His project was short-lived. The Alaska Syndicate bought out Heney and his backers in 1906. The syndicate intended to link the Bering River coal fields and the Interior copper mines by rail. Neither Cordova nor Valdez was to be the ice-free port serving Interior Alaska. That port was to be Katalla, a small town near the coal fields, where oil had been discovered in 1902.

Plans change again

Railroad construction from Katalla had only just begun when a series of violent storms destroyed Katalla's dock and breakwater, along with most of the town. Plans changed again. Cordova was chosen a second time to be the rail port. The syndicate would finance completion of the line that Heney had begun. Heney remained in charge of construction.

The railroad links Cordova and Kennecott

Track was laid to Tiekel River at Mile 101.25 by December of 1908. Rails reached Chitina by September of 1910. East of Chitina, the Kuskulana River was crossed in the winter of 1910 with a 550-foot long bridge, 228 feet above the floor of the river gorge. To the south, the "Million Dollar Bridge" at Mile 49, begun on April 1, 1909, was completed when the last bolt was driven home on May 16, 1910. On that day, river ice carried away the wooden supports that had held up the last span of the bridge only moments after the span dropped onto its permanent foundations. The bridge was reported to have cost a total of \$1.5 million to build.

In 1911, the 196-mile Copper River and Northwestern Railway linked Cordova to the syndicate's copper mines near Kennicott Glacier. The last spike, copper, not the usual gold, was driven March 29.

Of the total 196 miles of Copper River and Northwestern track, 95 miles were laid on bridges or trestles. In the Cordova to Chitina section alone, 129 bridges were necessary. Freight trains carried shipments to Cordova from the mines over the \$90,000-per-mile railroad once or twice a week. Between 1911 and 1938, when railway service was ended, nearly 600,000 tons of copper ore and 9,000,000 ounces of silver were mined at the Kennecott railhead and carried south by the Copper River and Northwestern Railway.

On trips north from Cordova the railway carried business travelers, tourists who left the train at Chitina for motor travel to Fairbanks, miners, and mining supplies. Completion of the railroad stimulated other activity in the valley of the Copper River and its tributaries. Although built to assist the marketing of copper, the railroad also made access to gold placers and lode mines in the region easier. As a result, by 1916, 30 placer mines and eight hydraulic operations in the area were producing gold.

This activity gradually diminished, as copper prices fell in the 1920s. In 1932 even the rich Kennecott Mines shut down, although a caretaker staff remained until 1938.

The Copper River and Northwestern shuts down

In 1938, the Copper River and Northwestern Railway stopped operations when the Kennecott Mines closed altogether. Although 13 miles of the line between Cordova and Cordova airport were operated during World War II and 60 miles of the line between Chitina and McCarthy were used for light tram traffic until 1947, general railroading was never revived.

Ballaine plans what becomes the Alaska Railroad

During the summer of 1900, Seattle real-estate developer and journalist John E. Ballaine began studying ways to construct an all-American railroad from an ice-free port to Interior Alaska. In 1902 Ballaine had a survey made of the mineral, timber, and farming potential of the Kenai Peninsula, and the Susitna and Nenana river valleys. Based on the enthusiastic reports, Ballaine decided on a route from Resurrection Bay north to the Susitna River, then to the Tanana River.

Alaska Central Railroad is organized

In March of 1902 Ballaine and other Seattle backers organized the Alaska Central Railroad Company with \$30 million capital. The railroad was to begin at Resurrection Bay, where the Russians had built ships. Surveyors arrived at what is now Seward in mid-summer 1903, and bought the homestead of Mrs. Mary Lowell for \$4,000. Ballaine's workers built a dock and a wharf at Seward and laid out a townsite. Track extended almost 20 miles north from Seward at the end of the first year's building. By the end of the second year's building, track had reached about 45 miles north to the Placer River valley. In the meantime, hundreds of workers were even farther to the north preparing railroad grade along Turnagain Arm.

The Alaska Central fails

Alaska Central financing was reorganized in 1904. The new financial support came from Chicago financiers backed by a Canadian bank. The new owners completed 52 more miles before they too went bankrupt in 1909. Large cost overruns caused by mismanagement and engineering miscalculations,

particularly in building through the Placer River Valley, contributed to the railroad's collapse. An attempt at reorganization failed. The rails ended at Kern Creek near the head of Turnagain Arm. In 1909-1910 the Alaska Central was again reorganized, this time as the Alaska Northern Railway Company. The Alaska Northern did only enough work in the following years to maintain entitlement to its right-of-way. The same financiers who were interested in the Copper River and Northwestern Railway now were interested in the Alaska Northern. They discouraged extension of the Alaska Northern, which would compete with their Copper River and Northwestern route.

Ballaine's dream comes true

In 1912 the U.S. Congress passed the Second Organic Act which created Alaska's first legislature. Another important section of the law created an Alaska Railroad Commission to investigate the railroad situation in Alaska.

The commission's five-month study recommended that the government buy the Copper River and Northwestern Railway and build a trunk line from Chitina to Fairbanks. This would cost less than buying and extending the Alaska Northern. The commission also found Cordova's harbor better than Seward's and less subject to naval attack. The Copper River railroad, however, was associated with the Guggenheims and the business monopolies they represented.

President Woodrow Wilson replaced President William Howard Taft before the commission's report was adopted. Wilson's incoming administration believed that purchasing the Copper River and Northwestern Railway would be an unpopular move. Shortly after taking office in 1913, President Wilson appointed a new study team, called the Alaska Engineering Commission. This commission was sensitive to the new administration's political concerns. The group was also impressed by the long-range benefit of opening the Matanuska and Susitna river valleys for agriculture and the coal resources there.

On March 12, 1914, President Wilson signed a bill into law that authorized a government-built Alaska railroad. The president was to select one or more routes from ice-free ports to Interior Alaska. Construction could include a total of 1,000 miles of track. Costs could not exceed \$35 million.

President Wilson selects a railroad route

In April of 1915, President Wilson announced his choice of a route. The railroad would run from Seward to the Tanana River, with a spur to coal fields in the valley of the Matanuska River. He directed the Alaska Engineering Commission to construct the railroad. The railroad was to follow previously built track across the Kenai Peninsula to Cook Inlet. From there it would go through the Susitna River valley and Broad Pass, then turn east to follow the Nenana and Tanana rivers to Fairbanks.

Between 1915 and 1917 the Alaska Engineering Commission completed the branch to the coal fields. It ran from the head of Knik Arm up the Matanuska River valley as far as the Chickaloon River. When this spur was completed in October of 1917, the commission concentrated on the route between Seward and Anchorage. The U.S. government paid \$1.1 million for the old Alaska Northern line. The purchase included 71 miles of track from Seward to Kern Creek on Turnagain Arm, advance grading and surveys, equipment, and shops. Private investments to create these resources had totalled about \$4.1 million. Extending the line that it had purchased, the Alaska Engineering Commission completed the track into Anchorage at a cost of \$300,000 per mile.

The Alaska Engineering Commission contracted with independent firms to build 100-foot sections of the railroad. This arrangement enticed contractors to move to Anchorage and bid on the work units. They in turn hired local laborers at hourly rates fixed by the commission.

The Alaska Railroad is completed

Construction proceeded north of Anchorage and also south from Fairbanks. By the summer of 1919 the railroad extended north from Seward to Talkeetna and south from Fairbanks to Healy. The rails finally joined at McKinley Station. Some permanent bridge work remained to be done and it was not until February of 1923 that a rail bridge across the Tanana River was completed at a cost of \$1.3 million.

On July 15, 1923, President Warren G. Harding arrived at the Tanana Bridge to tap in the golden spike that symbolized completion of the railroad.

The Alaska Railroad was not a financial success. By 1925 its expenses exceeded revenues by nearly \$1.8 million. Economy measures reduced this to just under a one-million-dollar deficit, but losses continued. There was adequate business north-bound carrying supplies and mining equipment from the port at Seward into Interior Alaska, but there was little to be carried south-bound on return trips.

The railroad management strove to cut costs even further and to boost revenues. Tourism was ambitiously promoted. The long-time railroad manager, Colonel Otto F. Ohlson (1928-1946), even encouraged a reindeer industry near Cantwell as a way to generate south-bound traffic. In the years just before World War II the Alaska Railroad began for the first time to have revenues exceeding expenses.



The Alaska Railroad station at Fairbanks, 467 miles from the beginning of the railroad at Seward and 29 miles from the end of the railroad at Chatanika.

Collection Name: Alaska Historical Library, Alaska Railroad Collection.

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World War II dramatically affects the Alaska Railroad

World War II dramatically affected the Alaska Railroad. Huge quantities of military supplies arrived at Seward, and later at Whittier, to be hauled by the railroad into Interior Alaska. Maintaining an adequate work force became a problem. Finally, Ohlson had to ask the military to send a Railway Operating Battalion to help run the Alaska Railroad. Ohlson hired women to do work formerly done only by men, hiring an all-woman maintenance crew at the Cantwell section house. Heavy use during the war and a lack of adequate maintenance seriously degraded the railroad's track and rolling stock.

War's end brings old difficulties

At the end of World War II, all of the Alaska Railroad's old troubles returned. They were compounded by worn-out equipment and a deteriorating road bed. The military construction boom of the 1950s and the pipeline construction boom of the 1970s helped to keep the line going and to pay for rehabilitation costs.

The federal government wanted to pull out, however. Beginning in 1968, successive national administrations looked for ways to get out of the railroad business in Alaska. The Alaska Railroad was the only federally-owned and managed railroad. Its operating losses were a constant drain on the federal

treasury. Although its 520 miles of track, 62 locomotives, 1,653 freight cars, and 46 passenger cars did not make the Alaska Railroad large in comparison to other railroads in the United States, it was a vital transportation link within Alaska. At the end of 1984, the State of Alaska arranged to buy the railroad to assure its continued operation.

Railroads not up to expectations

Although Alaskans once hoped that railroads would open up the land where they lived and sought their fortunes, this had turned out to be a nineteenth-century dream. New transportation means--automobiles and airplanes--were to provide more of the service for Alaskans that railroads had provided for the American west.

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